Chapter 1

Sharing Your Thoughts, 140 Characters at a Time

In This Chapter

- Understanding what Twitter's all about
- Seeing how individuals, organizations, and businesses use Twitter
- Discovering what you can do with Twitter
- Looking into third-party Twitter applications

You may have heard of Twitter but have no idea what it actually is. Twitter is basically a powerful *mobile* social network that allows you to keep up with the people, businesses, and organizations you're interested in — whether you know them personally or not. It also lets you share what you're doing with the world — everyone from your family and friends to complete strangers. (You'll have to bear with us to find out why you would want to do that.) Harvard Professor Andrew McAfee (`@amcafee`) describes Twitter this way: "With Twitter, my friends are never far away."

And `www.twitter.com` itself says that *The New York Times* calls Twitter "one of the fastest-growing phenomena on the Internet." *Time* magazine says, "Twitter is on its way to becoming the next killer app," and *Newsweek* noted that "Suddenly, it seems as though all the world's a-twitter." What will you think?

Every day, we see dozens of new ideas and ways to use Twitter. In this chapter, we do our best to introduce the basic ideas and explain how Twitter works and why it's so powerful.

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Figuring Out This Twitter Thing

Twitter is a fast-evolving, surprisingly powerful new way to exchange ideas and information, and to stay in touch with people, businesses, and organizations that you care about. It's a social network — a digital abstraction that represents who you know and who you're interested in (whether you know them personally or not) — that you can access from your computer, your cellphone, or anywhere with an Internet connection.

Twitter has one central feature: It lets users instantly post entries of 140 characters or less, known as *tweets,* through the `www.twitter.com` site or your cellphone, or by way of the numerous applications that are available for both. (We talk more about the different ways to tweet in Chapters 8 and 9.)

On the most basic level, Twitter is a communications network that combines elements of Short Message Service (SMS or *texting*), instant-messaging communication tools, such as AOL Instant Messenger (AIM), and blog publishing software, such as Blogger or WordPress. Like blogging, your tweets are generally published to the world at large where anyone can read them on Twitter.com (unless you choose a private account, so that only those you choose can see your tweets). Unlike blogging, you're limited to just 140 characters. Like instant messaging, you can communicate directly with people (through direct messages), but unlike instant messaging, each message has its own unique resource locator (URL), so each message is actually a Web page. Instant messaging also lacks the social network "following" features of Twitter and basic ideas like "publish-subscribe" and one-to-many broadcasting of messages. Think you can't say anything meaningful in 140 characters? Think again. Not only are twitterers innovating clever forms of one-liners, haiku, quotes, stories, and humor, but they're including links — in 23 percent of all tweets by one measure — and links carry a lot more information and context. Writing 140-character messages seems trivial. But headlines and very short advertising copy are famously hard to do really well — and the right words can be quite powerful. Consider: "Man Lands On Moon."

The idea of Twitter sounds simple — deceptively simple. When you think about how millions of people around the world are posting Twitter messages, following other people's Twitter streams, and responding to one another, you can start to see the significance behind Twitter's appeal. In fact, Twitter has noticed that it acts like a "pulse of the planet," a zeitgeist of what everyone is thinking about and doing and feeling, right now. Now that's pretty interesting!

True, Twitter can look like it's full of noise. But, once you find interesting people and accounts to follow, your Twitter stream shifts from a cascade of disjointed chatter to one of the most versatile, useful online communications tools yet seen — that is, if you take the time to learn to use that tool correctly.

In the beginning was the word: The origins of Twitter

Twitter connects a wildly diverse array of people from all over the world, erasing barriers and boundaries all the way. Some of the media hype has called Twitter nothing short of revolutionary. And because Twitter is so easily customizable and open-ended, it has continued to become more and more popular with people and companies.

But Twitter's beginnings, like so many other digital innovations, were humble. Twitter was built in 2006 by three technology entrepreneurs — Evan Williams, Biz Stone, and Jack Dorsey. All three were then employed by a San Francisco–based Web company called Odeo, which specialized in publishing software for *podcasting* (audio broadcasting over the Web). Dorsey was the one who came up with the original concept, and the three subsequently built it as an internal tool for Odeo employees. At first, they had no idea that it would catch on the way it did.

A management shakeup led to Twitter and Odeo's reincorporation under a new company, Obvious Corp., and shortly thereafter, Twitter was released to the public. Already a favorite among Silicon Valley's geek elite, Twitter had its real coming-out party at the South by Southwest Interactive Festival (SXSWi) — an annual confab of tech and media innovators in Austin, Texas — in March 2007 when it was about a year old. Not only did it win the conference's Web Award honor, but its rapid-fire messages became the de facto coordinating and communicating tool for thousands of SXSWi attendees and the company became the digital world's new darling.

Shortly after SXSWi 2007, Twitter was spun off once again, becoming its own company separate from Obvious Corp. — Twitter, Inc.

Now, millions of people use Twitter to keep in touch with family and friends, to launch and expand careers, to connect businesses and reach customers, to build a brand, to report the news, and a whole lot more. No two people or businesses use Twitter in exactly the same way, and that fact is part of the secret to Twitter's success. You might argue there isn't really a wrong way to use Twitter, (as long as you mind the terms of service and don't try to actively do harm) so you get to completely tool it to your own needs.

Twitter is a great way for you or your company to connect with large numbers of people quickly and personally, just like you were having a conversation. In tech-speak, Twitter is a microblogging or microsharing tool; however, you can more easily think of Twitter as a giant cocktail party with dozens of conversations you can join (or start) at any moment. Or, if you prefer a work metaphor, Twitter is like the office water cooler where any number of informal (or formal) conversations can take place.

If you're familiar with blogs, instant messaging, and Web-based journals, you can start to understand what makes Twitter so unique. The Web offers a lot of information. Twitter can turn those long articles, lengthy conversations, and far-reaching connections into easily digestible facts, thoughts, questions, ideas, concepts, and sound bites. In other words, when you have only 140 characters, you have to be succinct.

How Individuals Use Twitter

> *Tomorrow I begin the archeological dig that is my desk. I will Twitter each item as I process it.*
>
> — Author and comedian John Hodgman via Twitter, December 4, 2008 (`http://twitter.com/hodgman/status/1039327071`)

Looking at Twitter for the first time, you might be compelled to ask, "But *why* are all these people, many of whom seem like just random strangers, talking?" At first glance, Twitter seems flooded with disjointed conversations, interactions, and information. You can find news headlines, political debates, observations on the weather, and requests for advice. The idea of Twitter can be a bit confusing for new *twitterers* (people who use Twitter).

People have many reasons for using Twitter:

- **To connect:** Most people start using Twitter to forge connections and be a part of a community. Others just want to be heard. Twitter lets millions of people around the world hear what you have to say; then it lets you connect with the ones who want to hear from or talk to you about your passions, interests, and ideas.

  For more on the social side of Twitter, check out Chapter 12.

- **To record:** Some people tweet as a way to take notes on life. They use Twitter at conferences, events, or just walking around and may even jog their own memories later about something that happened or what they've discovered. For example, if you're walking down the street and you notice a new restaurant you want to check out when you have more time, you might tweet about that. Now everyone who follows you knows about this interesting-looking place, and you have a way of remembering to go back there yourself.

- **To share:** Some people use Twitter to share what they think, read, and know. They may tweet links to great articles or interesting items, or they may tweet original thoughts, ideas, hints, and tricks. Some tweet notes from speeches or classes, and others share choice bits of their inner monologue. Even when this information can get pretty obscure, with millions of listeners, someone's bound to find it informative or interesting.

- **To stay in touch:** Whole families and groups of long-term friends use Twitter to stay in touch. Twitter can send public or private notes to your friends, and it stores all sent messages, which means that you don't lose your thoughts when you close your browser (or your desktop application). Connecting to one another on Twitter is a great way to preserve an initial contact, such as at an event or conference, in a way that lets you gradually get to know them more over time.

Twitter is pretty easy to actually use, meaning everyone from your 8-year-old cousin to your 92-year-old great-grandma can figure out how to use Twitter and say hello. Because you can access Twitter by using either a computer or cellphone (or both!), it fits into mobile lifestyles and brings you closer to the everyday thoughts of those you're interested in.

How Organizations Use Twitter

Barack Obama's successful presidential campaign in 2008 was perhaps the best example of an organization using Twitter to solicit donations, raise awareness, and call people to action. During the campaign, tens of thousands of Twitter users followed Barack Obama at `http://twitter.com/barackobama`, where campaign staff used the service to provide the then-candidate's whereabouts on the trail and kick off new donation initiatives. (Even though election laws mean the account can no longer be updated, it has hundreds of thousands of followers at the time of this writing.)

The power of Twitter works for much smaller organizations, too. Groups such as churches and local charities can use Twitter to provide an additional way for members to connect, plan, and reach out beyond their immediate community. Preachers tweet about their planned sermons, youth group directors tweet about events, and local soup kitchens tweet when they need help. Whether it's extra hands for a project, far-reaching assistance with a fundraiser, or some other big idea, Twitter can enable organizations operating on a budget to think on their feet.

New organizations have also sprung up through Twitter. Some people have started their own donation campaigns on Twitter and encouraged other Twitter users to donate and then tweet about it. But Twitter isn't just for charities. Enthusiasts of just about any interest have banded together on Twitter. For example, you can find organizations for food and wine lovers, sharing recipes and swapping restaurant reviews on Twitter. (You can search for the subjects that interest you on `http://search.twitter.com`.)

For example, musicians use Twitter to spread the word about concerts, song releases, charitable efforts, and their daily lives as celebrities. (Even Britney Spears has an official Twitter account: `@BritneySpears`.) John Mayer (`@JohnCMayer`) live-tweeted from the GRAMMY Awards. Musicians working hard to make a name have used Twitter to engage thriving, and involved, fan bases.

Twitter has also been a big help for community efforts. Whether it's Amber Alerts, fundraisers, searching for kidney donors, or rescuing James Buck from an Egyptian jail (`http://twitter.com/jamesbuck/statuses/786571964`), Twitter has shone as a tool for social good. Plenty of people in the world want to lend a helping hand, and Twitter's platform makes it easy, in real time, with a global network of connections.

Businesses That Use Twitter

If individuals, community groups, and nonprofit groups can use Twitter (as we discuss in the preceding sections), businesses large and small can use it, too.

Discount airline JetBlue uses Twitter to advertise fare specials, put out weather alerts, and conduct customer service (`http://twitter.com/jetblue`). Coffee retailer Starbucks uses Twitter to connect with customers and spread company culture (`http://twitter.com/starbucks`), as does online shoe retailer Zappos.com (`http://twitter.com/zappos`). Early on, computer manufacturer Dell started a Twitter account (`http://twitter.com/delloutlet`) to promote special deals on returned equipment. It announced in December 2008 that its Twitter account has generated over a million dollars in revenue. Predictably, Dell now has many more accounts: `www.dell.com/twitter`.

So why would a business want to establish a presence on Twitter?

- To network with customers and see what they're saying.
- To answer questions.
- To finely tool a company image.
- To poll and pull in feedback.
- To take advantage of an innovative form of 140-character advertising. If you have a limited quantity of something to sell in a short amount of time, you can't find a better channel than Twitter to make it known.
- Even a business with *no* customers on Twitter can take advantage of five off-platform benefits that we talk about in Chapter 11.

But none of these reasons really scratch the surface of why so many people use Twitter. Whether you want to use it for mostly personal or mostly business reasons, or even a blend of the two, you'll find that your reasons for tweeting multiply over time while Twitter becomes more and more useful to you. Each chapter in this book clearly explains why Twitter has caught on like wildfire and how you can join in the fun (and enjoy the business benefits) of this microsharing service.

If you're not sure where to begin, you'll be glad to know that many professions are comparing notes about the best ways to use Twitter. For example, ExecTweets (`www.exectweets.com`) shines the spotlight on executives who use Twitter. You can find dozens of industry-specific blog posts and guides on how to use Twitter most effectively. Laura's Twitter consulting practice, Pistachio Consulting, started one list of these guides here: `http://pistachioconsulting.com/featured-articles/industry-guides`.

For more on putting Twitter to use for your business, turn to Chapter 11.

Getting Your Tweet Wet

Having breakfast and getting ready to ride. 6 hours today...

— Cyclist Lance Armstrong via Twitter, December 20, 2008
(`http://twitter.com/lancearmstrong/status/1069006436`)

When you log into Twitter, a question appears in large print across the top of the screen: "What's Happening?" The most basic activity on Twitter is to answer that question, whenever and however you feel like it. The beauty of this simple question is that you can answer it in so many different ways, and your answer can spark so many conversations.

Instead of "What's Happening?", Twitter's prompt used to be "What are you doing?" As more people were using Twitter, the company realized that many of its users were ignoring the former question and instead reported on things more interesting to them, not necessarily about what they were doing. To that end, Twitter is inherently flexible and open-ended, so you don't need to stick to a rigid set of rules. In effect, Twitter is what you make it. Feel free to tell us what you're doing.

Sometimes, the Twitter prompt has users stuck in a rut, freezing up out of self-consciousness, concerned that they're not doing it right, or are stuck with just plain old 140-character writer's block. You know these Twitter accounts when you see them: The twitterers end up twittering only about what they had for breakfast, that they're leaving the office to go home and watch *24,* or various other mundane life updates that don't spark much conversation. Many of these Twitter users don't end up getting involved in the Twitter culture, and some then stop using Twitter altogether.

If you're brand-new to Twitter and you're ready to try it out, turn to Chapter 2 for information on how to sign up, customize your profile, and adjust your settings. Chapter 3 fills you in on the Twitter.com interface — it's sort of a road map of the site, so you know where everything is.

You can get much more value from Twitter — and have a lot more fun — if you just let yourself relax and talk about what's on your mind. Passionate about aardvarks? Send out a few tweets with aardvark facts and see who talks back to you. Have a burning desire to change careers from accounting to roadie for a rock band? Talk about it! You can probably get a response or two.

How Twitter differs from Facebook

"Facebook is closed, Twitter is open. Facebook is structured, Twitter is scattered. Facebook is people you've known, and many you might have wanted to forget; Twitter is people you never knew, but might have wanted to meet. And because of all of that, barring an acquisition or failure to execute . . . Twitter will overtake Facebook and become the backbone of the real-time web."

— Brightidea.com CEO Matthew Greeley (@brightidea)

If you're a regular Facebook user, you may be wondering how Twitter is any different from the status updates that are part of Facebook. The main way in which Twitter differs from Facebook is that with Facebook, by default you're broadcasting your status updates to people you've allowed to be your friend and view your profile on Facebook. On Twitter, you're by default sharing your updates with the world. You can protect your Twitter updates so that only people you allow can see them, but that's not very common. Instead, most people leave their tweets open to the public, which means anyone who's interested in what you're saying can follow you — and you can choose to follow them back or just ignore them. You don't have to know the people you follow, and your followers don't have to know you.

Replies work much differently on Facebook, and as a result, the system is much less dynamic. On Facebook when people reply to your status update, their replies appear with your update itself, which moves farther and farther down in the feed, until eventually it's not even seen anymore. (These replies, however, are preserved on the profiles of the users who initially shared something.) On Twitter, the most recent replies are always at the top of the stream, which means the conversation continues to be relevant and visited for as long as people are talking.

On Twitter, people frequently repeat your tweets for their own followers. It's commonly called *retweeting.* If your band is playing at a club on Friday, you might tweet, "MyBand rocks out Blondie's, 123 Main St, LA, Fri 9/3 @ 9 pm www.myband.com for tickets". If any of your followers want to spread the word, they might tweet, "RT @yourname: MyBand rocks out Blondie's, 123 Main St, LA, Fri 9/3 @ 9 pm www.myband.com for tickets". That RT is shorthand for *retweet,* and by putting your name after RT, they're letting their followers know you're the one who originally posted it (and that you're the one whose band is playing at Blondie's). If you want to encourage people to retweet something, you can even put something like, "Please RT" in the tweet. What all this means is that your tweets can spread like wildfire, and you can get the word out (fast!) about the things you want to share.

To make retweeting even easier, Twitter has a Retweet link right next to the reply link.

It's really striking to see how much faster, more easily, and farther messages spread on Twitter. Sharing and passing along information is what makes Twitter a sensitive global news detector, a powerful tool for social change or marketing, and an interesting and dynamic flow of ideas and information.

Tweeting Like a Pro

We'd like to thank you in 140 characters or less. And we just did!

— Twitter co-founder Jack Dorsey, accepting Twitter's Web Award honor at the South by Southwest Interactive Festival in March 2007

Simply put, a *tweet* is what you call the 140-character message that you send out onto the Web by using Twitter.

Why call it a tweet? It's convenient, tying into the whole theme of birds chirping. Also, like much of the Twitter vocabulary, *tweet* is a term coined by the users, rather than the company — evidence of the playful loyalty that avid users have with the Twitter brand. In fact, it wasn't until late Winter 2010 that Twitter officially adjusted updates to tweets, based on how the world talked about tweeting.

Twitter limits the length of tweets to 140 characters (letters, numbers, symbols, and spaces), a length that may seem short at first. And it is. How in the heck are you supposed to say anything in this tiny bit of space? How can you distill your company pitch into 140 characters, review a book, or summarize a movie in so few words? With time, you get used to this length restriction. Perhaps one of the coolest things about Twitter is that the more you use it, the easier it is to write short, sharp, clear tweets. As you get more accustomed to tweeting, you find that squeezing thoughts into 140 characters often makes you refine the point in ways you wouldn't have thought of before.

Some Twitter users have reported becoming better salespeople offline, or better writers, because Twitter's mandated brevity forces you to focus your thoughts into concise, direct sound bites. Because Twitter's communication format encourages brief but engaging ideas, Twitter sparks conversations faster than almost any other Internet conversation format.

Branching Out with Third-Party Applications

At the risk of sounding like a Twitter cheerleader, don't ask "What *can* you do with Twitter?" Instead, ask yourself, "What *can't* you do with Twitter?" From its inception, Twitter has had a very open *application program interface* (API), which is the geek-speak term for code that lets external developers and programmers weave the Twitter service and functions into other applications and services on the Web. The open nature of the Twitter API has led some people to come up with very interesting uses for Twitter.

The most popular Twitter applications are downloadable client programs that let you manage and update your Twitter feed from your desktop; vying for most popular are TweetDeck (www.tweetdeck.com), Seesmic (www.seesmic.com), Twhirl (http://www.twhirl.org/), and Tweetie, (www.atebits.com/tweetie), but people access Twitter dozens of ways, including (about half of average use) Twitter.com.

On the iPhone, Tweetie 2 became such a dominant player, Twitter Inc. acquired the company as of April of 2010. By the time this reaches print, it should be the company's official iPhone Twitter client.

Thousands of tools already exist. Some are incredibly useful, like Co-tweet and HootSuite which help you manage multiple accounts and a lot of information, while others help you integrate with other social networks, like FourSquare or Facebook. (We cover these tools in Chapter 9.) The beauty of Twitter means that any application can be beneficial if Twitter users respond to it. Because Twitter can do so much, so simply, the array of third-party applications offers a nice balance of work and play.

If you want to stick with using Twitter just as a status update service, that's fine. In fact, many people do. But if you want to really maximize your use of Twitter, you may want to check out all the neat ways you can use it — for example, to track expenses, request restaurant reviews, follow gas prices, read the news, find out the weather in your area, give hurricane relief to people in need, fundraise, drive cancer awareness, and a whole lot more. This diversity of use makes Twitter a vibrant community that you can tap into both for fun and for business.

Where the name Twitter comes from

We want to get this out of the way: Yes, Twitter is a silly name. It calls to mind images of birds chirping, or the all-night gab-fests at junior high sleepovers. But to be fair, a whole lot of Web services have silly names — in an industry peppered with companies that have names such as Meebo and Veoh, a company called Twitter doesn't stand out as having a particularly odd moniker. (Bing and Google are chuckle-worthy too, if you think about it.) Co-founder Jack Dorsey has argued from the start that Twitter is a fitting name for the service. In an early interview with Jack, Ev, and Biz, (when Twitter was still owned by Obvious, Inc.), the founders answered a question about where the name came from. Jack said, "If you look it up in the dictionary, it's actually just [a] short burst of activity, and it's something that birds do. It's just like chirping." In this case, the name Twitter reflects the short bursts of "noise" (or tweets) that Twitter users make when they conduct their digital banter. (If you haven't made the connection already, this definition explains why Twitter's logo is a cartoon bird. To watch a video of the interview in its entirety, go to www.podtech.net/home/?s=obvious%2C+twitter.)